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Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2018]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Arbitrary Detention – China

0. Introduction

0.1. As NGO specialized in religious liberty issues, we would like to call your attention on cases of arbitrary detention in China of members of a Christian new religious movement, The Church of Almighty God.

1. Historical Background

1.1. In China, in 1989, a religious revival involved both the House Churches (i.e. the Protestant Churches whose activity is not authorized by the government) and the religious movement known as the Shouters. In the same year 1989, the person later identified as Almighty God by her followers began participating in meetings of the Shouters. In 1991, she began to utter words that followers compared, for authority and power, to those expressed by Jesus Christ. Many Christians started reading these utterances and believing they were "what the Spirit says to the Churches" (Rev 2:7, 17). In 1993, they started believing that their author was the incarnate God, the second coming of Jesus Christ and Almighty God, the unique God. Among these was Zhao Weishan, who would later become the administrative leader of the movement. The movement, born in 1991, became known as The Church of Almighty God (CAG, also known as Eastern Lightning). While stating that God incarnated in our time in a female human being, the CAG never mentions her name. Several scholars believe that she is Yang Xiangbin, a woman born in 1973 in northwestern China.

1.2 In the mid-1990s, a severe persecution targeted both the Shouters and the CAG. Since then the CAG has been continuously and severely persecuted in China. In 2000, Zhao and Yang went to the United States, and in 2001 they were granted political asylum. Since then, they have directed the movement from New York (Introvigne 2017b).

1.3 China, according to the CAG, is both where Almighty God has appeared as the "Eastern Lightning" mentioned by the Bible (*Matthew*, 24:27) and where the evil "Great Red Dragon" of the *Book of Revelation* manifested itself in the semblance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its persecution of Christians. This criticism of the CCP is one of the causes of the persecution of the CAG in China, although the CAG teaches that the Dragon will fall by itself under the weight of its error, and does not advocate any uprising or revolution.

2. Accusation of Crimes

2.1 Paradoxically, new impetus to the previously scarce academic study of CAG by Western specialists of new religious movements was given in 2017 by the Chinese authorities themselves. The Chinese Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association, which has direct ties with the CCP, invited twice several leading Western scholars to seminars organized in Zhengzhou, Henan, in June, and in Hong Kong in September, devoted to exploring the notion of *xie jiao* (sometimes translated as "evil cults," but meaning in fact "heterodox teachings," and to offer critical perspectives on CAG. One of the scholars was Massimo Introvigne, managing director of one of the NGOs signing this submission (CESNUR). See the article published in the Web site of Chinese governmental media conglomerate *KKNews* (2017).

2.2 During these academic exchanges, as they usually do, Chinese authorities tried to justify the persecution of the CAG by arguing that its members committed serious crimes. However, the documents supplied by the same Chinese authorities on the most famous of these crimes, the homicide of a woman in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014, proved that the assassins were *not* members of the CAG. They belonged in fact to a different religious movement that, while using the words "Almighty God" in its name, regarded as Almighty God(s) returned to Earth persons different from the one the CAG recognizes as Almighty God, and had nothing to do with the CAG. In fact, the assassins themselves declared they were not members of the CAG that is led by Zhao Weishan and struck by the CCP authorities (Introvigne 2017a; Introvigne and Bromley 2017).

2.3 Other accusations of violence and other crimes were also studied by scholars and appeared equally groundless (Folk 2017; Introvigne 2018).

2.4 It is also important to note that China started persecuting the CAG several years before the alleged crimes, confirming that the persecution was not motivated by accusations of crimes but by the CAG's doctrine, regarded as incompatible with CCP's ideology.

3. Legal Framework

3.1 Members of the CAG are imprisoned in China for "using" a *xie jiao*. This is purely a "crime of conscience," and does not imply any use of violence, or other illegal activity, except the fact itself of belonging to a *xie jiao*.

3.2 Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code makes "using" a *xie jiao* a crime punishable with jail penalties from three to seven years "or more" (Permanent Mission n.d). Not all decisions of the Chinese courts are published online, but thousands of them are. There is a vast number of published decisions where members of *xie jiao*, particularly of the CAG (listed as a *xie jiao* since 1995), were sentenced to long jail penalties (often exceeding seven years) based on Article 300. It is clear from these decisions that "using a *xie jiao*" is interpreted as "being active in a *xie jiao*" in any capacity. In fact, having been found in possession of literature of the CAG, or having tried to convert others to the Almighty God faith, have been regarded as sufficient evidence of being guilty of the crime punished by Article 300 (see e.g. China Judgements Online 2014, 2017).

3.3 *Xie jiao* are legally defined as "illegal organizations, which, through fraudulent use of religion (…) or by fabricating and spreading superstitious fallacies and other means to confuse and deceive others (…), control group members and harm society" (The Supreme People's Procuratorate 2017). In practice, such vague definitions mean that groups that are regarded as *xie jiao* are those that are included in the lists of *xie jiao* periodically updated by the Chinese authorities. The CAG has constantly been included in all lists of *xie jiao* published since 1995 (Irons 2018).

4. Arbitrary Detention

4.1 From no. 3 above is clear that those arrested, sentenced, and detained for "using a *xie jiao*," in this case the CAG, are detained simply for their exercise of their freedom of religion.

4.2 Enclosure 1 is a list of exemplary cases of CAG members detained for no other crime than "using a *xie jiao*," i.e. practicing and preaching their faith. Documents on each case can be submitted upon request. http://www.freedomofconscience.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/enclosure-CAG-UN-2018.pdf

4.3 Two typical cases are detailed in Enclosure 2, with supporting documents in Enclosures 3 and 4. http://www.freedomofconscience.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/enclosure-CAG-UN-2018.pdf

Respectfully submitted.
Paris, May 24, 2018

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